

## **Twisted Little Games by DarkShadows\_EvilMind**

**Category:** IT (2017), IT - Stephen King

**Genre:** Actually Supportive Parents, Aftermath of Torture, Animal Abuse, Assault, Attempted Murder, Beaten and Burned, Blood and Injury, Creepy Patrick Hockstetter, Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, Eddie Kaspbrak is a Mess, Fridge Horror, Gross, Heavy Angst, Henry Bowers Being an Asshole, Homophobia, Homophobic Language, Hurt Richie Tozier, Internalized Homophobia, Knife Wound, M/M, Minor Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Mix of Novel/Film Elements, Near Death, Not Really an AU but Pennywise Isn't Mentioned Much, Panic Attacks, Patrick Hockstetter is His Own Warning, Patrick is Scarier than Pennywise Let's Be Honest, Psychological Trauma, Rape Aftermath, Richie Tozier Needs a Hug, Richie Whump, Sexual Violence, Soft Eddie Kaspbrak, The Greater the Hurt the Greater the Comfort, Torture, Underage Rape/Non-con, extreme sexual violence

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**Summary:**

After suffering a panic attack while playing Truth or Dare with his friends, Richie attempts to escape the dire situation only to smack into the Bowers' gang in the woods—and fall into the clutches of the demented Patrick Hockstetter.

When he is found the following morning, he's barely hanging on to life. Will the friends he ran out on be there for him, even if they know his darkest secret? Richie doesn't think so, but maybe they can

prove him wrong.

## 1. Amidst the Mists and Coldest Frosts

### Author's Note:

Hello there! This is my first fic in this fandom and I guess I decided to start things off with a crash and bang and an explosion of epic proportions at Richie's expense. This story is very dark, very disturbing and vile and upsetting. Please pay attention to the tags and proceed with caution. It gets worse before it gets better, but it does get better. Richie is too much of a precious marshmallow to leave wallowing in agony forever. He deserves love.

I really am not sure when in the timeline this story would take place... Maybe it's just an AU. Let's agree to disagree. It's just a fanfic. They know Pennywise is real, they have their hideout from Chapter 2 (no real spoilers I don't think), but Patrick is very much alive and well and Henry isn't any crazier than normal.

Welcome to my dark and twisted mind~

Richie felt his heart plummet into the pit of his stomach as the game was announced, his head even starting to spin the slightest bit as his pulse picked up. They were all sitting cross-legged together in their secret hideout, Richie between Eddie and Bev in the circle, playing stupid games and showing off card tricks. It had been a peaceful moment—a nice reprieve from the horror that was every other waking moment in Derry—and then, in an instant, it was shattered.

“I know, let’s play Truth or Dare,” Beverly suggested, smirking at Ben who laughed and tried to toggle between agreeing simply because it was Bev’s suggestion and saying no like he really wanted to.

“Yeah, Truth or Dare!” Eddie proclaimed.

Stanley said something very non-committal, Mike sounded like he thought it was all in good fun, and Bill... Who the fuck even knew what Bill was trying to say, honestly.

Richie typically understood him the best, knowing what he was thinking sometimes a split second before Bill could even start forming the words. Sometimes Richie helped him finish his sentences when he felt particularly friendly—oftentimes he finished it with something lewd the boy would never say.

Right now, though, all Richie could hear was his blood rushing through his ears as he stared down at the dirt beneath him. It seemed to be swaying back and forth, dipping like waves.

He couldn't even think of something witty to say, or something crude. He just wanted to get up and run away. He didn't even want to bother with an excuse.

Someone must have addressed him and Richie missed it, because next thing he knew, Eddie was clapping him on the back and saying, "Richie doesn't like to play 'cause we'll find out he's all talk and no action."

"That's not what your mom said last night," Richie snapped, adjusting his glasses and unconsciously leaning away from Eddie—unwittingly leaning himself closed to Beverly who laughed at him somewhat sweetly.

"If he doesn't want anyone to know his secrets, I guess he'd better just choose dare," she said, winking at him when Richie scowled at her.

"Y-Yeah, R-R-Richie. N-Now's y-y-your ch-chance to p-p-prove you're n-not a-all t-ta-talk."

"At least I *can* talk, B-B-B-Bill," Richie spat, more venom in his words than he'd meant. When his friends carried on discussing the rules of the game (Eddie demanding that no one make him do anything nasty, didn't they realize how many germs were down here, yada yada), Richie realized disheartened that he'd been hoping his jab would be enough to make Bill so angry as to kick him out.

It was not, and now he was stuck here as the game kicked off—unable to think of an excuse to leave that wouldn't make him look like a coward. Saying he was late for his appointment to bone Eddie's

mother wasn't going to cut it this time around.

Mike went first, chosen by Beverly, and agreed to tell a truth. Richie tried to pay attention, tried to channel his wit into some kind of sharp remark. By the time Mike finished speaking, the others were laughing and Richie was looking back and forth between them—unable to remember what Mike had just said. Mike chose Bill—Bill picked dare and ended up having to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in a Southern accent. (Why Mike hated all of them enough to subject them to such a torture after they'd saved him from Henry Bowers, Richie had no idea. Maybe they should've left him to get the stuffing kicked out of him.) Bill chose Stan and by the time Stan had given his selection, Richie was close to hyperventilating and even hypochondriac Eddie was too enthralled with the game to notice.

Stan chose Ben.

Ben chose Eddie...

Only Beverly and Richie were left.

Richie took too many quick, shaking breaths and stared at the ground frantically, as if he'd find a pebble that would be his way out of here.

*Come on, Richie. Think! Just say truth. They're probably going to ask if it's true you wore girls' underwear until third grade or something stupid. They're not going to ask that.*

“Richie! Truth or Dare?” It was Eddie. Oh no. No, no. He was at Eddie's mercy and the germaphobe wasn't going to let him off the hook easy.

“Dare,” Richie said, feeling his face blanch as soon as he did. What the fuck kind of answer was that!? He had a plan—a plan! Stick to the plan!

(It didn't so much matter to his panicked brain at the time that he didn't really have much of a plan at all besides ‘get out alive and hopefully with at least one friend’.)

“Kn-kn-knew y-yo-you'd be t-to ch-chicken to p-pick t-t-truth!”

“Ah, shut up, B-B-Bill,” Richie snapped, not realizing that he’d already used that joke once tonight.

“Wow, Richie—way to be a dick,” Bev said, humor only thinly veiling her annoyance at him.

“Ah, you know, he’s gotta act like one ‘cause he ain’t got one,” Eddie chimed in.

“Still bigger ‘n yours,” Richie said, staring at the ground again, sniffing loudly because his nose was starting to run. He had a desperate, shaky feeling that he was about to start tearing up like some pathetic school girl left out at prom and he didn’t even know why.

No one was going to know to *ask that!*

The dare was stupid—entailing making himself a bra out of leaves and stems of different plants in the woods and wearing it the rest of their game.

Of course it was stupid. This whole *game* was stupid.

But every time the rotation brought the focus back to him, Richie felt like he was about to throw up. It was the feeling he got when waiting for his parents to come home after he’d broken something or gotten a detention at school. Knowing he was in deep shit and helpless to protect himself against it.

“I dare you to pick Truth your next turn!” Given to him by Stan, laughing. By this point, Richie’s leafy bra was accompanied by being forced to wear his glasses upside down (which was giving him a raging headache), and he’d been dared to drink rain water out of the tin can being used to catch the leak. (Eddie nearly fainted, or vomited, or both, when Richie swallowed one singular mouthful.) So far, he was doing well and no one seemed to realize that their Trashmouth was steadily descending into hysteria right in front of them.

“Fine, but don’t come crying to me when you find out I knocked up your mother.”

“It sounds like you’ve got a thing for older ladies,” Bev joked.

“Yeah, save it for your turn,” Richie muttered.

Even if they asked, Richie knew he could always lie. But he was so, so worried they’d know it was a lie—that they’d know the truth whether he answered or not. That they knew already, without even having to ask.

So, when his turn came, Richie didn’t even hear the whole question. He felt himself say “Truth,” because he had no choice but to obey the previous dare, and then something in him snapped.

“Isn’t it true that...even...with another...?”

“This is just bullshit! Can’t we do something else? I mean, come on! How long have we even been down here? I’m bored out of my fucking mind! This game’s childish! Let’s go do something else—something *fun* for once!”

“Richie’s so mad!” Stan laughed.

“Yeah, I’m just some big fucking joke, right!?” Richie snapped before spitting out vile sentence after vile sentence—insults and accusations and lies, anything that came to his mind that he thought, in his panic, might make everyone forget he’d even been asked a question in the first place.

“W-Whoa. C-C-Ca-Calm d-d-down, Rich-chie. It’s j-just a jo-joke!”

“Is it!? Because I don’t think it fucking is! You guys can just stay down here for-fucking-ever! I don’t care! I’m going home!” He fixed his glasses and tore off the leaves and steams he was wearing before grabbing his shirt and stumbling for the exit while his so-called friends shouted after him.

“C’mon, Richie! Don’t be like that,” Bev called.

“It’s just a game, man.”

“Did you get your period or something? What is *with* you?”

“Ah, shut up, Eddie!” Richie hissed, giving up on buttoning his shirt and fighting his way up the ladder and into the dark forest above. When did it get so dark out?

“You don’t even have a flashlight!”

“I don’t need one! I’m not gonna get lost!” Richie yelled, slamming the trapdoor down just before Bill could reach the top of the ladder to stop him.

He could hear his friends shouting after him as he tore through the woods, running faster and faster as the tears which had been threatening him all evening started to fall. No matter what he told himself, no matter what he did, he couldn’t make them stop.

They *knew*. It felt like they *knew*. And if they did, they’d hate him. He’d have no friends left. They were all going to hate him. They’d let Bowers and his gang kick his teeth in while shaking their heads and saying he deserved it.

Suddenly, the calls of his friends seemed to become distorted. Their cries of his name had turned to laughs and jeers—and then, all of a sudden, a bright flash of light tore through the pitch-black woods in front of him and Richie stopped in his tracks.

The distorted jeering, he realized, was not his friends’ voices, but rather his enemies’. Ahead of him, he made out a flash of Belch’s twisted face in the flash of fire from an aerosol can set alight like a blow torch.

Richie stumbled backwards, snapping a branch under his feet which he expected to have draw the attention of the gang like a prey animal in a nature documentary. Luck must’ve been on his side, however, because Henry set off another blast of fire, singeing the fur on some animal that Belch was holding in welder’s-gloved hands.

Richie looked around quickly, as if he’d somehow catch his bearings in the dark and figure out the best way back to the hideout. All he saw were shadows and shrubs and the occasionally burst of light while a feral animal screeched in pain. Richie did *not* want to be next.

He backed away slowly, clapping his hands over his mouth to stifle the sound of his shaking breaths. He was sobbing, he realized, and scared out of his wits. The best thing to do would be to hunker down behind some bush or tree and wait it out. Henry would kill the animal or get bored, and they'd all go off somewhere else. What Richie did instead though, was back himself straight into Patrick Hockstetter's chest.

"Watch where you're goin', four-eyes!" Patrick sneered, his arm suddenly wrapped around Richie's throat, lifting him up off the ground a good foot or so—effectively cutting off his air supply. Richie thrashed against him, beating his heels into Patrick's legs and knees only to feel the older teen waver the slightest bit behind him. "Henry! Look what I caught trying to catch a glimpse of my dick!"

Richie clawed harder at Patrick's hand when he heard many thrashing footsteps cutting through the fallen leaves and foliage toward him and Patrick. The more he fought, the harder Patrick seemed to squeeze him until Richie felt as if his skull were about to explode from the pressure and need for breath.

He was thrown forward onto the ground at Henry Bowers' boot-clad feet, and the next thing he knew, a lighter was being held up to his tear-streaked face.

"What's the matter, little bitch? Scared of the dark?"

"Fuck you, Bowers," Richie wheezed, his mind spinning in circles as he tried to come up with an escape plan. When he tried to make a break for it, one of the Bowers' gang—Richie really wanted to say it was Belch—kicked him so hard in the ribs that he curled onto his side on reflex.

"What should we do with him?"

"I'll tell you what we're gonna do," Henry said before kicking Richie in the skull with his heavy boot. It was as if the gesture were a spoken command. Richie was suddenly being kicked in so many places, by so many people, he couldn't even get enough air to scream. His entire body was doused in pain, shock waves of it tearing through him as he lay defenseless and huddled into a ball. His left hand was

stomped on as he brought it up to shield his face. His ribs were cracking—his nose was bloodied. By the time he felt hands gripping his shoulders and yanking him onto his feet, Richie’s eyes were so full of tears he couldn’t tell if his glasses had broken or not—or if he even still had them on.

There was a burst of yellow flame, its roar breathing heat into his face so close he felt his first layer of skin singe as if with sunburn. The fire came again, this time lingering with the stink of burnt hair.

“Stop! Please! Please! I didn’t do anything to you!” Richie cried as the gang laughed at him, Patrick holding him in place and ducking almost playfully every time Henry would light the spray from the aerosol can. “Help! Bill! Somebody! Help me!” It didn’t occur to him how pathetic he must look, how weak he had to be to beg for help from someone he knew wasn’t listening.

“Aw—look at the little crybaby! Does the crybaby need a new diaper?” Belch jeered, earning a malicious laugh from Henry and the others.

Richie tried to think of something smart to say, but all that came to mind was pure terror. He didn’t want to die—he didn’t want to die like this, alone in the woods and at Bowers’ mercy.

The flames stopped for a moment so Henry could use Richie as his punching bag while Patrick pinned him by his arms. The bully went so far as to bounce around for show, acting like the boxers on television before landing blow after blow to Richie’s stomach until he vomited rainwater and the remnants of pilfered snacks into the leaves.

He was punched in the face twice, then shoved down into his own sick.

At least it’s not Eddie, Richie thought bleakly as he stared through cracked and smudgy lenses at his now-filthy hands—coated in slime from his own guts. Eddie would hate this... Eddie would probably have passed out—or started a spiel about all the bacteria and germs that live in one’s stomach.

Above him, the bullies were still taunting him and calling him names, but Richie could hardly hear them.

His ears were ringing and his chest heaved with shaking gasps, desperate to get oxygen after having the air repeatedly knocked out of him. His body throbbed with horrific pain—no part of him seeming to be spared from the forceful kicks and stomping. His teeth hurt, his nose, his *ears*. When did he get kicked in the *ear*?

“Gimme that,” Patrick snapped, his lanky form suddenly looming over Richie who could only shuffle the smallest bit away. His left leg was completely numb, and once he realized that, it was as if his breathing tripled in speed.

He was panting desperately when he heard and felt the hot rush of flames against him—only this time it was worse. So, so much worse.

His bangs were on fire and Henry was holding his arms this time so he couldn’t get away to put the flames out. He thrashed violently, kicking and snarling like an animal—twisting around in his own puke, making a mess of himself—while the acrid smell of burnt hair choked his lungs.

“Here, let me help with that,” Patrick cackled, somewhere far in the distance.

“Dude! What the fuck!”

Richie realized two things as he was shoved forward into Patrick’s bony-ass knees.

One, he was no longer on fire, and two, everything smelled like piss and smoke.

“You fucking got it on me, you fucking sick fuck!” Henry roared.

“Gross, man! What the hell?”

“Ah, come off it—pussy!” Patrick shouted back.

While they shouted, Richie slowly tried crawling away—moving like a battered animal as he held his no doubt shattered hand to his chest

and dragged his numb leg behind him. He tried not to make a sound, but could still feel himself sobbing, could feel the leaves under his body crackling—though his head made everything sound as if he were somewhere under water.

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Richie let out one final, desperate scream—his throat seeming to rip from it—as Patrick had him in his clutches once again.

“Dude, you’re gonna kill him!”

“C’mon, Patrick, he’s covered in piss! What’s wrong with you?”

“Give me your knife,” Patrick said, whether to Bowers or another member of the gang, Richie didn’t know. All he knew was he was as good as dead. He was going to die like this while his friends stayed in their secret base and laughed at him.

“I don’t have it!”

“I said give me your knife!”

“Fucker, I don’t have it!”

“Fine, you give me *your* knife!”

Richie was torn between struggling and laying limp in Patrick’s grasp, not able to get enough air in his lungs to scream or beg.

“This is on you—fucking crazy, motherfucker.”

“Yeah, yeah! Go on, get out of here. Wouldn’t want to get your pretty hands dirty,” Patrick was sneering while the Bowers gang stumbled off into the trees.

Richie didn’t know why, but somehow left alone with Patrick felt a hell of a lot worse than being surrounded by him and his gang.

He’d always noticed the way Patrick would look at him—the way he seemed to single him out at school as his personal favorite to torment. Bowers hated Mike the most, because he was Black, but the

rest were all the same in his eyes. The other members of the gang didn't seem to care who they caught, as long as they caught one of them. Hockstetter... His favorite was Richie, with no clear, bigoted reason why.

Unless...

Richie was being dragged across the ground—rocks and twigs scratching and cutting him until his jaw slammed into a boulder with enough force to wrench him from Patrick's grasp. Richie tried—he really, really tried—to get up, to run while he had the chance, but he barely even managed to lift his head from the ground before it fell back down into the dirt. His whole body was shaking as tears cut down his bleeding cheeks.

Patrick was now on his knees, over top of him, saying something that Richie couldn't understand through the rushing sound in his ears.

He tried to beg the older boy to stop, tried to reason with him second before he felt the tip of a sharp blade stab into his collarbone, splitting his skin open and sending out a gush of warm blood. Richie feebly brought up his good hand to push Patrick away, only to find his palm slit with the knife before it set to slicing through his misbuttoned shirt until it was flayed open—his stomach now sporting a shallow yet bleeding scratch. The blood mixed with the rivulets of sweat coursing down his sides, soaking into the dirt beneath him.

Everything seemed to happen in flashes. A burst of agony there—the backhand across the face. A shimmer of horror here—being stripped naked in the woods by Hockstetter who laughed as if he were watching a great comedy skit and couldn't get enough.

Richie screamed for help while Patrick howled in delight on top of him.

“No one's gonna save you. You're my little toy and I'm not done yet. No one saves you until I say so. You don't die until I say so. That's how this whole thing works!”

“You're insane,” Richie cried, not even sure his swollen mouth formed the words.

He was being beaten again and could hardly feel it. He knew it was happening, felt his head being jarred and jostled this way and that, but the agony he was in had become so constant... Nothing else was getting through.

Somewhere, parts of his brain were firing off broken thoughts, shattered attempts to take him someplace else—someplace that didn't hurt so damn much.

*Beep-Beep, Richie.*

*It's summer.*

*New High Score!*

Richie came crashing back into his body as he felt something tearing into his body. He was unable to scream, his mouth suddenly stuffed full of Hockstetter's tongue. His legs spasmed against the hips suddenly between them, against the intrusion stabbing at him from below.

“No!” He slurred, trying to turn his face away. “No! No—Get off me! Get the fuck off me! *Get the fuck off me!*” His voice had turned shrill with fear and Hockstetter was laughing at him again, not even seeming phased by Richie crashing their skulls together in a last ditch effort to get the older boy to *stop*.

“I like it when you play hard to get,” Patrick crooned, making Richie's stomach clench again. “But this is *fuckin'* impossible,” he added as he rutted the head of his cock against Richie's tightly-clenched entrance. He managed to force it in maybe a centimeter or two, extracting another feral scream from the boy beneath him, but it wouldn't go any further without appearing to hurt Patrick too, for he let out a low huff of annoyance and pain—like the noise one makes after getting a paper cut.

“Please let me go,” Richie whimpered, feeling Patrick draw back the slightest bit. “I-I won't tell anyone. Please. I w-won't say anything.” He feebly pushed against Patrick's chest again, expecting to be hit more than anything, but the older teen drew back a bit more—filling Richie with the very worse sense of false hope before it happened.

“This oughta loosen things up,” Hockstetter said, chuckling to himself as if he were telling a joke and couldn’t keep his composure through the punchline.

The very next thing Richie knew, he was being stabbed. It was fast—so, so fast—and brutal, over just as soon as it started like getting a shot at the family practice, only a knife punching and slicing into him.

He wanted to scream, but his throat had closed. He wanted to cry, but all he could do was blink rapidly in shock or horror. Blood was spilling out from between his legs where the knife had been withdrawn, and then Hockstetter was over top him again, cackling and gyrating.

The splitting pain came again, feeling as if he were being set on fire between his thighs. He could feel something wet pooling beneath him, making his skin crawl as he both fought to make sense of it and block it out.

Something was moving inside him, and it wasn’t the knife.

Richie stared up past Patrick’s shadowy face at the black leaves and even blacker sky. He was sucking in sharp hisses of breath, never enough to fill his lungs or stop the dizzy feeling in his head. His hands meekly pushed at Patrick’s chest, then settled into fussing against his arms where they had him pinned...

Then Richie was laying limp and letting it happen.

There was nothing he could do. No one was going to save him. He was going to die. If his friends even bothered to look for him, they would find him naked and ruined. They’d probably scoff at him, cover their faces in disgust.

“Filthy little faggot.” The words were hissed into his ear and he didn’t know if they were his own or Patrick’s.

Richie stared up at the sky, looking at the smeared bursts of stars through his skewed lenses. A vertical crack split Patrick’s silhouette in half.

He was still rocking back and forth, but the pain had stopped.

Richie couldn't feel his body anymore.

His brain flickered with odd thoughts while he choked on his own breath.

Eddie's shoes.

Bev's short hair.

The dinner his mom made last weekend.

Street Fighter.

*New High Score!*

Summer.

It's summer...

Richie's hands lay beside his head in the dirt, tingling and prickling like the rest of him as he felt—rather, sensed—Patrick pull off of him. Richie whimpered—not sure if trying to communicate or from the pain of being so suddenly empty. He gave a few more ragged breaths, then stilled where he was left in the dirt. He wasn't sure if he was alone or if Patrick was gearing up for a second round.

He hoped he was alone. He was ready for this to stop now. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve it, but he was sorry. He was sorry he talked so much that the universe saw fit to pulverize his jaw and face. He was sorry he'd ever learned to speak at all if this was where it landed him.

Richie felt a hand on his cheek and closed his eyes—blocking out the black leaves and dim stars he'd been hopelessly trying to get lost in.

"Doesn't this feel good?" Patrick was whispering into his ear.

Only then did Richie realize the other boy had his hand wrapped his flaccid penis, trying to get him excited when Richie was fairly certain he was bleeding out. Still, Patrick kept stroking him, squeezing him—

digging his fingernails in and scratching him when Richie didn't respond to the touches.

"I want to show you my favorite hiding place," Patrick seemed to hiss, his voice sounding twisted and blown-out as he released his death-grip on the smaller boy's abused appendage.

The last thing Richie heard before his mind and body finally parted ways was a sickening chuckle that would've chilled him to the bone if he had enough consciousness left to interpret it for the dark, vile threat that it was.

## 2. He Thrusts His Fists Against the Posts

### Notes for the Chapter:

A little more hurt with our first splash of comfort.

Thank you all so much for your support! I really did not expect anything positive to come toward this story and I'm so excited! You are the best!

~Also I guess this AU can officially be described as Richie didn't make it to the Well House to fight It, but everyone else did.~

Richie awoke in a state of horror and panic. Wherever he was, it was dark and it stank and he *hurt*.

Oh, holy *fuck* did he *hurt!*

There was the smallest crack of light ahead of him and Richie forced himself to push toward it, ending up toppling forward out onto the ground and getting a mouthful of foul-tasting, copper-colored dirt.

It hurt to lift his head, feeling as if his neck had been snapped. Maybe it had. Richie, for the moment, couldn't remember. He didn't even know who he was.

He whined, his throat raw and aching, as he tried to shift himself forward. His left hand was swollen, black and blue with blood and dirt and some yellow film crusted onto it. His chest stung—his legs didn't want to move.

He was naked.

He was laying next to a small pile of animal corpses.

Suddenly, Richie was gagging and hacking up spit and phlegm into the dirt beside him. Every time he heaved, his jaw cracked and sent bolts of pain rocketing down his neck.

His glasses were smudged and broken, making it hard to see even

apart from his tears. Flashes of the night before came back to him, haunting him with stunning vibrancy despite how bright and warm it was outside.

He had been stuffed into a rusting vintage refrigerator—the kind you couldn’t open from the inside. Somehow, Patrick must’ve forgotten to close it all the way, or one of the corpses got caught in the door and prevented it from locking and he just didn’t notice.

Either way it happened, Richie was sure if it hadn’t, he’d be dead. He would’ve suffocated in there on the poisonous fumes of carcasses. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

He had pulled himself up onto his knees in the dirt, every motion sending new agonies to his brain until he was sobbing just as hard as he had the night before. He clasped his arms over his chest and trembled, trying to hunch in on himself and cover up, feeling so vulnerable and so small. He feared that at any moment, Patrick was going to descend on him—or the rest of Bowers’ gang—but it wasn’t enough to spur him to move.

It took all of his strength to shuffle a few feet away from the tomb of a fridge, and by that time his rectum had torn back open and resumed bleeding just as badly as the night before—from being stabbed, from being *raped*.

“Filthy little faggot.”

The words sounded as if they’d been whispered in his ear and Richie screamed against them, covering his head with his arms as he lurched away.

Somehow, he ended up on his feet. Somehow he’d stumbled and crawled and dragged himself back into the trees, into the cover of the forest.

He collapsed at the base of a large tree where the roots disrupted the earth and formed little patches of moss which teemed with mites and insects of all kinds. Richie paid them no mind as he fell into them, bleeding and exhausted. He escaped the fridge, but he wasn’t going to last much longer. He felt it getting harder to breathe with each

passing second, he felt how lightheaded he was becoming from the panic and blood loss alike.

A trail of crimson spatters would lead anyone to where he lay, curled up like an infant against the trunk of the large tree—naked and shivering. His ribs ached. His legs were numb again... His jaw was so sore and swollen he couldn't open it more than an inch or so to sob or wheeze.

Somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard someone scream his name. He worried it was Patrick... That it was Henry Bowers and his gang.

Worried it was that evil fucking clown.

He feared, though, more than anything else, that it was just in his head—some defense mechanism in his brain making him think he was about to be saved so he could feel comfortable enough to close his eyes and *die*.

“Richie!”

“Richie?”

“Richie Tozier!”

He tried to answer. Richie tried to get his voice to force out a word or a sound, but all he managed was an exhausted sob as he lay in the moss. It wasn't real. No one was there.

No one was coming.

He didn't want anyone to see him like this.

“Richie?”

“Richie Tozier?”

Tears cut down his cheek and dripped off the bridge of his nose down into the damp moss, mingling with dried bits of blood. The voices, in some ways, sounded like they were getting louder—closer—but in others, started to seem distorted. Sometimes it was as if they were

echoing in an empty pool, others staticy and faded.

His chest cracked each and every time he took a breath, sending shooting pains through his ribs and down his spine. He couldn't move his legs even to uncross his ankles, too afraid of aggravating the stab wound between them.

A knife...

Richie squeezed his eyes shut and sobbed despite the pain it caused his jaw.

Patrick Hockstetter had sodomized him with the blade of a knife.

He didn't know how long he laid there beneath the tree and cried, and bled. He wanted to roll onto his back and couldn't. He wanted to fall asleep but was so afraid he'd die if he did. He didn't want to die like this. He didn't want found like this.

He wanted to disappear—he just fucking wanted to disappear.

Everything hurt and he just wanted it to stop. He wanted it to stop.

Please, please make it stop!

He was crying, forcing out ragged noises from his wrecked throat. Breathing hurt. Crying hurt. Laying still hurt.

He just wanted to go home—he wanted his mother. He wanted someone to come wake him up from this nightmare. He'd do anything, *anything* to find this was all some awful dream.

“Richie?” Like a whisper...so close to his ear.

Who was that?

“Mom?” He stuttered, his eyes stuck closed despite how hard he tried to open them. His voice was weak, barely even audible to his own ears.

He was dying...

Richie knew it.

“Richie?” The voice was so gentle and so soft—it felt as if his mind were being wrapped in soft blankets, caressed and soothed. He still hurt, but he felt the smallest bit safer. He wanted so badly to open his eyes, to see who was talking to him and if it was really his mother like he so desperately hoped.

“Mommy?” The word felt so foreign in his mouth. He hadn’t used the childish name in so many years. There’d even been a time the previous year he’d tried calling his mother by her first name in an attempt to make himself feel older—but that got quickly shut down by his father who was less than gentle about it. Now, at thirteen, here he was so scared and pathetic and broken that he was back to calling her mommy like a little boy.

“Here! Over here!”

Richie flinched violently, his eyes snapping open and coming to focus on ripped jeans and muddy boots. That voice—he didn’t ever want to hear *that voice* again.

Henry Bowers was kneeling in front of him, shouting so loudly it made Richie’s ears ring even worse.

“Say anything and you’re fucking dead,” Henry hissed into his ear. Richie couldn’t even move his neck to pull away from him. It was as if he’d become paralyzed. Maybe he had... “I found him! Dad!”

“Ah shit—Henry, cover him up, for God’s sake!”

Richie watched, eyes bleary and unfocused, as another shadowy figure appeared. Henry was struck hard across the back of the head—and then a second time when he didn’t move fast enough to take off his jacket. The next thing Richie knew, the heavy material fell over his shoulders and hid his bruised and bleeding flesh from sight.

“This is Officer Bowers. We found the boy.”

Richie felt his body beginning to tremble, his eyes fixed on Henry’s nearly terrified expression. He hadn’t moved to stand or even shift his weight after throwing his coat over Richie’s body, but still Richie

expected the boy to start punching him or kicking him the way he had before.

“Send the EMTs in. We’re in the third sector—near the perimeter of the junkyard.”

Henry Bowers was staring at him.

Richie felt his eyes starting to close of their own volition. He was afraid—more afraid of Henry than of death because where there was Henry, there was Patrick. He didn’t want his eyes to close. He didn’t want to give Patrick the chance to sneak up on him and take him again.

He didn’t want hurt anymore.

“Don’t just sit there like a fucking idiot! Go help them find us!”

Richie flinched, hurting his neck as he recoiled from the aggression in the older man’s voice. Henry was on his feet in a matter of seconds, walking stiffly away as if he were afraid of being struck with something while his back was turned.

For a split second, Richie thought he understood something—and then the thought slipped away as the cold-faced officer was looming over him. Somehow, he didn’t feel any safer.

“Can you hear me? We’ve got help on the way. Just hang on.”

A heavy, hot hand was running through his hair and Richie whimpered under its touch, unseen bruises screaming in protest to even the slightest pressure.

“Stay with me. Help’s coming. Richie, stay with me.”

The man kept petting him like a wounded dog and all Richie could do was lay there and let the man hurt him. His neck wouldn’t even turn to shake the man off.

The ache of his bruised head, compared to the agony which followed as hurried EMTs slapped his body down onto a stiff gurney, was nothing. It didn’t matter that Officer Bowers’ almost threatening

requests for him to keep his eyes open had Richie terrified enough to try to obey. His eyes closed and everything else was once again bathed in blackness.

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“Richie? Oh, my God. Richie? Honey, get the nurse. Richie, can you hear me? It’s Mom, Richie. Can you hear me?”

Cold. Richie was very, very cold. And a soft touch of ice was smoothing over his left cheek. He turned his face away only to have the icy touch appear on both sides of his head. He was trying to open his eyes to see who was attacking him, but it was so bright it felt as if he were being stabbed in the eye sockets each time he made an attempt.

“Richie? Oh, sweetheart. Oh, my God. It’s Mom, Richie.”

He tried to speak, but it felt as if his mouth had been stitched shut. The icy touch was smoothing underneath his eyes and the space he was in suddenly got louder. He could sense more people in the room and for some reason his first thought was of Henry Bowers coming to attack him.

Then he thought of Patrick Hockstetter. He saw the older teen’s sneering face lunge for him in the darkness and his eyes shot open in fear despite the sting of the bright, burning light.

There was no Patrick, he realized. Just the blurry face of his mother peering down at him, tear-streaked and unkempt. Her hair was a frizzy mass of half-bun, half-ponytail atop her head and he felt one of her tears drop onto his cheek.

“Oh, my God. My God, Richie.” She was smiling at him sadly and Richie realized it was her hands on either side of his face, stroking his cheeks with her thumbs.

“Mom?” He tried to say, but it really just came out as a whimpered, slurred ‘M’ sound.

“Please step back, Mrs. Tozier. Richie, can you hear me?” Suddenly there was another woman in front of his face, someone Richie didn’t

recognized, and he was gripped with the irrational fear that she was going to try to take him away from his mother and his chest seized with panic. Something in the room was beeping, something was binding his arm to the surface he was laying on.

Richie tried desperately to escape from the woman over top of him, but all he ended up doing was sending a shock wave of pain down his spine that left him crying. He couldn't see and there were people trying to attack him.

Every time he closed his eyes, he just saw Hockstetter sneering down at him, licking his lips with hunger.

"No! No, no!" Richie cried, trying to turn his face away from the hands clutching at him—pulling him.

He was being kicked. He was being punched. Hockstetter was plunging a knife into him.

He was locked inside a fridge filled with corpses and blood.

And then he was alone.

He opened his eyes and the room was dark save for a pale, yellow glow coming in from a cracked door. It was a hospital room, he realized. He was in a hospital bed—hooked up to wires and monitors and an IV drip like some kind of Frankenstein's Monster.

He certainly hurt as bad as if he'd been struck by the force of a lightning bolt.

No one was touching him this time, though Richie hardly remembered the first time he'd been awake. It made it easier for him to assess his surroundings, to make sense of the blurry shapes in the dark room. He was able to shift around on the mattress a little bit, the rustling of the plasticy sheets sounding impossibly loud in the otherwise silent room. His motion made him suddenly aware that there was something stuck into his penis—something solid and uncomfortable that dragged against the mattress when he moved.

Richie felt his breaths start to come more rapidly as he desperately tried to get his arms to obey even the simplest of commands. One

hand, the one which had been crushed, was wrapped carefully in a soft, white cast, but the tips of his fingers were mostly free. Somehow, he managed to get his stiff and uncoordinated digits to wrap around the thin tube that had been forced inside of him and he slowly, painfully yanked it out with a sharp hiss. Once it was out of him, it was as if a switch had been flipped. The rest of the wires and cables felt just as invasive and he tugged at them—ripping them off and digging them out of his flesh until he heard a sharp gasp and a clatter, and then his arms were being pinned to his sides.

Again, he saw Patrick Hockstetter sneering at him and he screamed. The boy was pinning him down into the dirt, flashing the sharp blade of a knife before plunging it—

“Richie! Baby, please! It’s *Mom*. It’s just Mommy, baby, please stop—Richie, please!”

He opened his eyes and found his mother’s face impossibly close to his own. She was sobbing and pinning his wrists together. His fingertips were covered in blood—his sheets were spattered in blood.

Two nurses burst into the room and Richie watched his mother be ushered back a few steps while the women busied themselves with holding Richie still and hooking all of the wires back up to him—save for the catheter, for the moment at least.

“It’s alright, Richie. No one’s going to hurt you,” one of the women was saying. “You’re alright. You’re safe. Okay, Richie? You’re safe.”

“Are you in any pain?”

Richie couldn’t focus to answer them. He was looking around frantically for his mother, making out her impossibly blurry figure on the other side of the room. When she noticed him staring at her, she came over to the bed and sat down beside him, smoothing her hand over his head the way she did whenever he was home sick from school.

“Mom?”

“I’m here—It’s okay, Richie. I’m right here.” She leaned in and kissed

his forehead only to have Richie jerk away.

She couldn't kiss him! He was *filthy*.

*"Filthy little faggot."*

Richie let out a whimper and closed his eyes tightly, only to be assaulted with images of Hockstetter's evil face.

She couldn't look at him. She shouldn't look at him. He was dirty.

Richie started scratching at his thin blanket, trying to pull it up over his face only to have the nurses push it down and pat his shoulders in an attempt to bring comfort. He didn't *want* comfort. He wanted to hide—he wanted to shield himself so his mother couldn't see his shame.

Did she have any idea what Hockstetter had *done*? Did she have any idea of the filth in his hair and on his cheeks?

The twisted bully had *pissed* on him and she was petting him like she couldn't *smell* it!

Richie didn't realize he was sobbing until one of the nurses was wiping beneath his nose.

"It's okay—you're okay. Calm down, Richie. Deep breaths, okay? Breathe in. Now hold it. Good, good. Let it out slow, okay? *Slow*. Let's try again. Breathe in. Hold it... Let it out *slow*."

Little bit by little bit, Richie's breathing was gotten under control. He felt how Eddie must've felt every time he had an asthma attack—like his throat had sealed itself off and the air he did get felt like acid in his lungs.

The next thing he knew, he was hugging his mother and buried into her chest like a small child—like the pathetic crybaby he was.

"It's okay. I've got you, Richie. I've got you." She was cuddling him and pressing kiss after kiss to his forehead and temple while her hands rubbed his back and shoulder.

It felt like hours passed before she let him go, laying him back against the bed which had moved to be propped up into a sitting position for him. The nurses offered him water which he sipped with a shaking hand. They asked how he was feeling, put medicine into his newly-inserted IV line, and tried to explain to him what they'd done for him in the *eight weeks* he'd been unconscious.

For what it was worth, Richie listened to less than half of it. The parts he did hear made him start to get that throat-clenching feeling again and he tried to focus on crinkling the empty plastic cup instead. His usual quick wit was gone. He couldn't think of a joke—he couldn't think of a sarcastic reply to the horrific things being said to him.

Broken jaw. Fractured ribs. Nerve damage. Temporary colostomy. Reversal procedure a success.

Richie just wanted to go back to crying but whenever he tried to hide himself under the blankets, the nurses pulled them away. When they finally left him alone with his mother, she wouldn't let him hide either.

"Do you feel okay, baby? Can I get you anything? More water?"

He shook his head but accepted it as she wrapped her arms around him again. He was afraid to close his eyes for longer than it took to blink. Scared he'd see Patrick—scared he'd fall asleep for another two months.

So much could've happened in that span of time. His friends could be...

He felt his breathing pick up again and before he could help himself, he was sobbing as though someone had told him his friends were all dead. All the while, his mother just held him and shushed him, kissed him and snuggled him—rocked him back and forth in her grasp like a tiny child.

He wanted to so desperately, but he couldn't feel safe.

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When they told Richie he would have to speak with the police about what happened, he'd feared that it would be Officer Bowers, Henry's father, who came. He prepared himself for the man's angry looks, his vicious and unspoken threats that if Richie dared implicate his son, he would be checking out of the hospital early for his reservation at the morgue.

Instead, it was a woman with a high and glossy ponytail who sashayed in, smiling at him as if she were about to surprise him with a present instead of interrogate him.

It was an accident, but the first thing Richie let slip was, "Who are you? Where's Officer Bowers?"

The woman's smile disappeared almost too quickly and she shot a look toward Richie's mother who tightened her grip on her son's shoulder protectively.

"Officer Bowers found Richie that morning," she whispered, her voice shaking slightly which Richie found odd. He twisted his head to look up at her, wondering why she seemed so fearful. What was she afraid he was going to say? "Henry led him right to Richie. Like he knew he was there..."

Henry had found him, it was true, but Richie wasn't so sure he'd done it on purpose. His mother sounded so convinced though. Did they think...

"Let's let Richie tell us what happened," the officer said, a ghost of her former smile reappearing on her lips. "To answer your question, Richie...Officer Bowers has passed away. My name's Officer Tate."

"What happened?" Richie asked, not sure why his heart rate was picking up. Maybe it was the woman's anxious aura tainting his own. He didn't know, but he didn't like it.

She hesitated, like she was assessing whether or not it was safe to give him any information, then said, "He was murdered."

"By *Henry*," Richie's mother said, squeezing his shoulder again. Suddenly, his father had a hand on him as well, rubbing up and down

his back.

Immediately, it clicked. They thought Henry had been the one to hurt him.

“Yes,” Officer Tate said. “By Henry... But we’re not here to talk about Officer Bowers. We’re here to ask about what you remember, Richie.”

“I-It... I-It was He-Henry,” Richie stuttered, feeling how Bill must’ve felt every time he tried to talk.

He felt guilty for some reason, thinking of the way Henry had acted when he’d found him in the woods—how he’d seemed terrified. How his father had been rough with him. It didn’t excuse the awful shit he’d done, but he wasn’t the one who’d dragged Richie deeper into the forest and stabbed him, tortured him and assaulted him for who knew how long before leaving him to die. Henry was insane, as evidenced by the fact he’d snapped and killed his old man, but he wasn’t even half as bad as Hockstetter.

“What was Henry?” Officer Tate asked, looking exasperated—the way Richie’s teachers always did after his third joke in a row during class.

“The woods,” Richie said, looking down at his crossed legs—half covered by the thin hospital blanket. “He and...he and his friends found me taking a short cut home.”

He didn’t want to talk about this. They had all the evidence they needed in the hospital reports to know what happened after that. He didn’t want to be forced to say it out loud.

“Which friends?” Officer Tate asked.

Richie hesitated, taking too many trembling breaths as he debated whether or not to cut Patrick out of the story all together. Maybe he wouldn’t hurt him again if Richie lied and covered his back. It wouldn’t hurt to try.

“Belch and...and Vic,” Richie said, swallowing hard as his stomach clenched.

“It was just the three of them?” Officer Tate asked, her voice

somehow sounding like she *knew* he was holding back. He felt as if he were caught—no, he *knew* he was. His brain was screaming at him that they all *knew* the truth and were aware that every word coming out of his mouth was lies. He had to look so stupid to them—trying to implicate Henry, trying to make Patrick look innocent.

Oh, fuck... If he didn't admit that it was Patrick, if he let them find out he was covering for Hockstetter, they were going to think he'd *wanted* it. Why else would he protect him?

Richie felt the first of the tears bite the back of his eyes as he choked out Patrick's name.

"H-He was there, too," Richie said.

"You saw Patrick Hockstetter on that night?" Officer Tate asked.

Shakily, Richie nodded—thankful for his parents' grasps on him, fearing that at any moment he would slump over and fall off the bed.

"They beat me up and... And when they were all done, Henry dragged me off. I don't remember... I don't remember the rest. I'm sorry. I-I can't—I'm sorry, Mom," he looked up at her, shaking and desperately trying to get air into his aching lungs without sobbing.

She smiled at him and kissed his cheek, her expression only darkening the slightest bit when he cringed away from her. He couldn't help it. He *had* to. He'd showered so many times in the little hospital bathroom, but he still felt so filthy. He couldn't let her kiss him when he was so gross.

"It's okay, Richie. Just take your time," Officer Tate said.

"Maybe you can come back another day," Richie's mother said, shifting closer to Richie on the bed.

"If it's alright, I only have a couple more questions." The officer looked to Richie's mom who gazed down at him expectantly. He could make the cop go away if he wanted to. His parents would scare her off if he asked—but she'd just come back. When Richie nodded, Officer Tate smiled again and asked her next set of questions. He was thankful she didn't ask more details about what 'Henry' had done to

him. “You’re sure there weren’t any more people involved in what happened?”

“No. Just... Just them. Bowers’ gang. They pick on me and my friends all the time—are my friends okay?” He’d asked this question so many times and received the same answer from his mother and father, but somehow it only felt true after it was spoken by the cop.

“Your friends are alright, Richie. I don’t think any of them took the short cut you did that night. The reason I asked if there was someone else is because no one has seen Patrick Hockstetter since the night you were attacked. I wondered if maybe you knew something about that.”

Patrick disappeared?

There was no way he’d been so frightened and ashamed of what he’d done that he ran away. Patrick had been proud, the whole time laughing and smiling like it was all some great, new game. He wouldn’t leave Richie behind.

“Did he and Henry maybe have an altercation? When was the last time... Or, what is the last thing you remember about Patrick?”

“I don’t know,” Richie said, trying not to think about Patrick at all. The last thing he remembered was the other boy laughing while fondling him, trying to get him aroused before turning vicious again and dragging him off toward the fridge. He didn’t even remember being shoved in there. He just remembered Patrick touching him and

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“He says he doesn’t know,” Richie’s father said, calm and collected as always though Richie could pick out the very subtle notes of pain in his voice. “And I for one think it’s obvious what happened. That boy attacked *my son* and then—”

“Please, let’s just hear it from Richie—”

“—murdered his friends to keep them quiet. It’s no mystery what happened here. All those missing kids... It stopped as soon as that monster was put in jail.”

“We need to let Richie talk, Mr. Tozier,” Officer Tate warned.

Henry murdered his gang?

Kids had stopped disappearing?

What about the clown? The one question Richie couldn’t ask was the one he needed answered the most.

Henry had killed Belch and Vic, Patrick was missing, but what about that fucking clown?

Did Pennywise take Patrick? Was Patrick even afraid enough of anything to season his meat to the monster’s satisfaction?

“A-Are my friends okay?” Richie asked again, tears streaming down his face. Again, he was told they were fine. “Did they go missing?” Bill wanted them to go after Pennywise. They’d been making plans to go after that clown and kill him for good—stop the killing for good. It just seemed impossible that they could’ve done it.

“Richie, your friends are fine. Bill, Eddie, all of them. All of them are fine,” his mother said.

“I need you to tell me what you remember, Richie. If Henry did something, we need to know. We’re still trying to find Patrick. We’re trying to find the other missing kids. If you know anything...please. It’s okay to tell me. You *need* to tell me.” Officer Tate was starting to sound annoyed which didn’t help Richie’s nerves. He felt pathetic just sitting there crying, shaking like a wounded animal.

“I don’t know what happened to him—to Patrick,” Richie said, sniffing and staring down at his knees. “He left with the other two when Henry started to... When... Th-They said it...” His breaths had started picking up and he could barely get his mouth to form words let alone coherent sentences.

“What did they say, Richie?”

“They said he was going to kill me... That it was on him if he did. They didn’t want to be a part of it. They didn’t know what he’d do,” Richie sobbed. His brain was torturing him with images of that night,

wrecking him with flesh memories of Patrick's hips between his thighs, the other boy's tongue snaking into his mouth, the knife—

The interrogation stopped when Richie vomited onto the floor.

He had given his statement and it was decided Henry Bowers had beaten and assaulted him before starting a killing spree when he feared he'd get caught. He may have killed Patrick the night of the assault, but the other two were murdered the same day as his father a week or so later. Richie wasn't needed to make an appearance at court, but he was forced into counseling at the hospital where he had to recount the horrors all the same. Every session he had to remind himself to say Henry, not Patrick, always Henry. It gave him only the smallest bit of relief to know that his attacker was most likely dead.

He was also set up with a physical therapist to help him regain the use of his exhausted and achy limbs.

His father stayed with him most days and his mother stayed at the hospital each and every night. She slept beside him in his narrow hospital bed, holding him and kissing his forehead whenever the night terrors struck him.

She would muss his hair, scrunching up his curls—even his bangs which had mostly grown back from Patrick's flame-thrower attack—and reassure him that he was safe, that his friends were all safe, and that no one would hurt him again. She played the part of some great protector, even though Richie knew she wouldn't stand a chance against Patrick if he wasn't really gone. No one would...

Never.

“Do you want to see your friends?” His parents asked him two weeks into his hospital stay. He'd regained most of his muscle control and could walk a full lap around the hospital without needing something or someone to hold onto, and feared he'd probably be released soon. He'd be sent home and back to school... Bowers was in jail, Patrick was missing, and Belch and Victor were dead—somehow Richie still didn't believe that school would be safe.

“No,” Richie answered, probably too quickly. They'd asked him

before and he'd said no then as well. He said he didn't want them to see him like this, no matter how much they were all pushing.

He was scared they didn't really know what had happened to him—that the adults had all kept it under wraps and out of the papers. But Derry was still a small town and it was inevitable that word would have gotten out to someone. Someone at school would know and someone would've used it to taunt his friends.

If they even were still his friends and not just asking to visit for show.

Richie didn't want them to look at him. He didn't want to be some pitiful, broken little creature in their eyes. If they saw him, they'd know—whether the adults had told them anything or not. If they saw him, it would all become real.

He told his parents no, and yet the very next day there was a knock at his partially open hospital room door and Bill was peering in at him, Eddie and Ben, Bev and the others staring at him in a cluster.

His mother wasn't there, his father was at work—there was no one to make them go away.

“S-S-Sorry f-for b-b-barging i-in,” Billy stuttered while Richie still grasped for words. “W-W-We we-were w-wo-worried ab-about you.”

Richie stared at his friends who slowly pushed their way into his room one by one, choking on the words he wanted to say.

*Get out. They shouldn't see him like this. Go away!*

“You don't look that bad, Trashmouth. I bet you've been faking it so you don't have to come to school.”

Richie didn't even know which of his friends said it because his eyes were locked on Bill—his vision turning bleary.

He wasn't ready to see them yet. He wasn't ready to answer any more questions or even try to joke about the condition he was in. The very thought of going back to school was enough to make him rip out tufts of his own hair—he'd picked his own skin open just so the therapists at the hospital would deem him unfit to leave.

“R-Richie? A-Are y-you o-okay?” Bill asked.

Richie blinked hard, shame burning through his chest as he felt tears drip down both of his cheeks. They were all *staring* at him. They *knew*. They all *knew*.

They knew what he was. They knew what he’d done.

They knew he’d been *asking* for it.

Richie glanced between their faces. For some reason, Beverly was crying too. Stan looked like he wanted to run for the door and Eddie...

If Eddie knew, he would—

Richie covered his face with his hands and squeezed his eyes shut, trying his best to block out their voices and the room and the reality that he couldn’t really expect to hide inside the hospital forever.

Eddie was such a germaphobe. If he knew what Patrick had done—that *Patrick* had done it—he would never be trying to get close to Richie. He would never call out to him, never try to touch his shoulder or sit beside him. Eddie would be ranting about AIDS and diseases and how soon they would all be infected just from being in the same room as him.

In an instant, Richie had himself convinced that Bill had somehow forced Eddie to come here, that the other boy would never be willing to subject himself to Richie’s unclean state of his own free will. He probably gave one of his hardened, mature speeches about sticking together and being there for one another. Eddie would relent, simply to keep from being cast out of the group.

Eddie would never touch him again by choice. Eddie would never want to come over for movie nights or sleepovers now. Not now that he was filthy.

Not now that he—

“*Filthy little faggot.*”

Richie screamed, the voice sounding so close to his ear he was afraid Patrick had somehow snuck past the Losers and into his bed. He screamed as loud as he could, but still it came out muffled.

He opened his eyes to realize he was being crushed against someone's chest. Immediately, he started fighting—shoving and pushing only to have his efforts exhaust him, only to collapse against Beverly's soft chest and sob the same way he did in private with his mother. Only this time each and every single friend he had was watching him fall apart—was witnessing him prove just how weak and pathetic and deserving he was of what had happened.

"It's okay, Richie," Beverly whispered, her voice so gentle and quiet that he knew her words were meant only for him. She wasn't speaking for show, to prove a point to Bill that she cared about him enough to support his friend. She was there for Richie—for some insane, incomprehensible reason. "No one thinks any less of you. It's happened to me, too."

He wanted to shout at her—ask her what it felt like to get fucked with the blade of a knife and maybe scream a few insults at her or something—but what he did instead was hug her back and cry as if he weren't making a scene, as if he weren't embarrassing himself.

Before long, there were more arms around him. More than he could really bear to have touching him all at once, but their bodies around him felt, in many ways, like a shield—hiding him from everything that existed outside of their friendship and their concern for him. But as quickly as he found warmth in it, he found the pain.

They'd never hold him like this if they knew—if they *really* knew. Especially not Eddie. Eddie was never going to touch a filthy leper like him. Eddie was going to convince them all that he had AIDS and they'd leave him. They'd be more afraid to touch him than they were of that evil fucking clown and he would be alone.

*"Filthy little faggot."*

Richie squeezed his eyes shut and wished impossibly hard that he could disappear.

### 3. And Still Insists He Sees the Ghosts

#### Notes for the Chapter:

I actually cannot write short, succinct stories and be satisfied with them. So I'm extending this to six chapters (?) and it's going to be a struggle to come up with perfect chapter titles. I hope you guys are okay to travel on a little longer! I just think Richie deserves a little more comfort before we call it quits. And what do the Losers/Eddie think about this whole situation? I still have so much more I want to share with you!

Thank you again for all your kind words and support! You're all so amazing and I really appreciate your feedback! It makes me so happy to know there are people reading my works and enjoying them--no matter how odd or twisted they may be. (My mind is a dark web of angst. Welcome. So sorry.)

Enjoy!

His mother found him half asleep on the floor of the shower. Richie was shaking, trembling as the water had long ago turned icy cold. He wasn't ready to move. He wasn't ready to talk or to see anyone, but his mother was there, pulling him out onto the bathmat as though he were a corpse—as if he were an infant in need of care.

“Richie! What were you thinking? You’re going to get sick! You’ll catch your death doing this!” His mother cried, wrapping him in a towel. “Richie... Baby, please talk to me. Please—what’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer, just accepted the towel and stumbled off to his bedroom, wrapping himself in familiar sheets and laying still as if he were dead.

He felt dead.

He missed his friends but didn’t want them to come over. They’d

visited him twice at the hospital and the second time Richie had embarrassed himself so badly that he doubted the Losers would ever want to see him again anyway. Eddie had been sitting on the bed next to him, the others all piled around on the bed and in the available chairs, watching television. Richie had fallen asleep—he did that a lot because the drugs his therapist had given him made him awfully tired twenty-four seven—with his head on the other boy's shoulder.

The one who lived at the hospital had his filthy, pissed-all-over head on the germaphobe's shoulder.

He didn't know how long it lasted—it could've been an hour, could've been less than five minutes—but when Richie awoke, it was to Eddie's worried rambling.

“—I told you all before, about my mom's friend in New York. He caught AIDS through a drop of blood through a hangnail from touching, *just touching* a pole in the subway. You can catch a disease, literally off any surface. It doesn't matter. Literally any surface. If someone sick touched it and you touch it, you'll catch it. Especially with AIDS.”

Richie felt the words stab through his chest like knives—and trust him, he knew what that felt like. He couldn't even think clearly enough to start to cry from them. He'd been tested and checked and tested over and over and over again. They said he didn't have it. They said he'd had a couple infections, but it all cleared up and none of them the sexual kind. The nurses all said he was fine, but his friends didn't believe him.

“Ah, our Sleeping Beauty awakes!” Stan said, smiling for a split second before he seemed to realize Richie wasn't oblivious to what was going on.

“Feeling better? You drooled all over my shoulder. Do you know how many bacteria are in human saliva—”

“Yeah, well if you think I have AIDS then you should just leave! Just fucking leave! Just leave me alone! I already told you I don't have it! I told you! I don't have AIDS!”

“Way to go, Eddie,” Stan snapped.

“We t-told you n-not t-to bring it up,” Bill said, as sharply as he could manage with his tongue tied in knots.

Eddie tried to defend himself, tried to convince Richie he hadn’t been saying he thought Richie had AIDS but that there had to be at least one person in the hospital who did and that was why he refused to raid the cafeteria like the others wanted.

In the moment, Richie didn’t believe him. He cried and yelled more and shoved Eddie out of his bed, demanding that everyone leave. As soon as they were gone, he’d started ripping at his hair and then shut himself in his small, hospital bathroom where he showered off for the hundredth time—wishing he could actually start to feel even remotely clean.

No matter how many times he washed his hair, no matter how much of it he trimmed while trying to retain the bulk of his curls, he still smelled smoke and piss. If AIDS had a smell, he’d catch whiffs of it too.

Now, he was at home and nothing much had changed. He was supposed to go back to school the next week and he wasn’t prepared for the rumors he’d have to face down. If his friends thought he had AIDS, the school absolutely believed it.

Richie didn’t want to go... He was honestly willing to do anything to keep from going back.

His parents, it seemed, were aware of this as well. Richie was ashamed to admit that most nights, his mother would still end up sleeping in his bed—or trying to sleep. Even with the tranquilizers from the doctor, he had night terrors and woke up screaming. He and his mother had matching dark circles under their eyes and Richie doubted he could’ve felt any worse if he’d actually punched her to cause them.

Despite his very real fear and trauma, his mother would just stroke his hair and try her best to convince him that “getting back into a routine should help. It’ll take your mind off things. Don’t you want to

see your friends?"

Just like in the hospital, his parents ignored it when he said no and summoned the Losers Club anyway.

Even Eddie who Richie couldn't bear to look at.

It didn't help matters at all that he was still wrapped in his towel and wrapped in his blankets because he refused to get out of bed the day after being pulled out of the shower. His father, having finally run out of patience, told his mother to let him "sleep it off." Richie had eaten a little bit of the food his mother brought for him, but otherwise he had been content to lay still and stare at the wall. Yeah, he was doing his best to "sleep it off."

Apparently, that sent the message to his mother that she needed to collect his friends to come stare at the spectacle he'd become. How had his mother just let them all in without telling him? He was in a towel! He had no *clothes* on! How was he supposed to get *dressed*? Especially with Beverly peering into his room as well!

Even with a protective pile of blankets covering every bit of him except his face, he felt so exposed. He wasn't prepared for company. He didn't want gawked at.

He didn't want Eddie in his bedroom if the other boy was so convinced he had AIDS.

"H-Hey, Richie," Bill said, standing awkwardly in the doorway—seeming to hold back the others who tried to funnel in but couldn't go past his arm. "We w-wanted to s-stop by and ch-check on you. We're a-all really s-sorry about wh-what happened at the h-h-ho...h-hos-hos—"

"We're really sorry, Richie," Stan blurted out, making Bill sigh in either annoyance or relief. Richie couldn't tell. "We hope you're not...too mad. Eddie's just stupid—"

"Hey!"

"—and doesn't know when to *shut up*." Stan finished.

Richie just stared at them, still in shock that so many people were at his bedroom door without his consent. This wasn't a public place like the hospital—this wasn't the sort of place where unexpected visitors were, in a way, expected.

"W-We ho-hope th-that's okay," Bill said, looking sad and anxious.

"It's... It's really not," Richie said, swallowing hard before adjusting his glasses out of habit. His heart was pounding frantically in his chest and he felt like he was going to need to pop one of his tranquilizers to calm down. "I was in the middle of taking my glamour shots for Eddie's mom. I don't even have my underwear on."

"Ew!" Stan exclaimed, crinkling his nose as he faltered a step back.

"Yeah, she sent me over with hers. Hope you like full frontal, asshole," Eddie mumbled, his expression still looking uncertain—like he didn't feel exactly comfortable joking like they used to.

Why would he? Everything was different now.

"Full frontal asshole? That's an oxymoron, isn't it?" Richie said, feeling the first genuine smile tug at his lips as Eddie threw his inhaler at him.

It was Eddie, though, so his toss was bad and it barely even made it to the edge of Richie's bed before bouncing off onto his rug to be retrieved by Mike who waved at Richie nervously, awkwardly, before handing Eddie back his inhaler.

"Eddie..." Bill scolded, only stuttering a little bit as he passed the smaller boy an almost parental stare. It was exactly the same look Richie's mother used to give him when he tried to make too many puns out of product names at the grocery store.

"For real though, guys, can I get a minute? I don't think you're ready to behold the majesty of my wang." He rustled his blankets as if in threat of exposing himself, earning the desired effect of scaring all of his friends out of his room and back into the hall.

"J-Just t-tell us when yo-you're r-ready," Bill said, muffled by the closed door.

“It’s gonna take a minute...” Richie felt that his friends had to have been able to hear the tremor in his voice, and maybe overcompensated a little by tacking on a quick, “Can Eddie slide those photos under the door? Might speed things along.”

“Beep-Beep, Richie!” Stan called.

Richie trembled the entire time he got dressed, checking the door repeatedly as if he thought his friends would burst in on him. He nearly fell over trying to hurry himself into his white briefs and realized that he was, in fact, anticipating they’d burst in—he expected them to throw the door open to catch him off guard and laugh at him. They’d see his scars, they’d see the sores on his skin where he’d picked at himself in anxiety.

As quickly as the fear gripped him, so did the shame.

These were his *friends*. Why did he think so little of them? What had they ever done to earn his mistrust? He was the one who ran out on them and got them all into this mess. It was his fault for everything that had happened. How dare he even *imagine* that his friends would be cruel?

Why was he such a *bad friend*?

By the time someone knocked on his bedroom door, Richie realized he was hyperventilating with strands of ripped out hair wrapped around his fingertips.

“R-Richie? Ev-Everyth-thing okay?”

“J-Just a second,” Richie stammered, suddenly anxious that Bill would think he was making fun of him. Then he wondered why the hell that made him anxious. He made fun of Bill all the time. His friend knew it was all in good fun.

His *friend*.

*His friend.*

He was such a *bad friend*. He’d run out on them, left them to face the clown alone because he’d let himself get caught by Hockstetter.

Hockstetter—God, no! Please, please not those memories again. Please no!

“Still waiting on those pictures of Eddie’s mom,” Richie choked out when he couldn’t bring himself to open the door. His scalp was stinging and he kept finding his fingers wound back into hair without realizing it. He had pants on and one sock—no shirt.

He looked down at himself and shivered at the sight of his abdominal scar from his colostomy and its reversal after he’d healed from being stabbed—stabbed.

Patrick Hockstetter stabbed him.

Patrick—

“Richie?” It was Beverly, right behind him.

Richie flinched, his hands instantly dropping from his hair to cover up the scar.

Why had they sent in *her* of all people? One of them, Stan at the very least, had to realize that Trashmouth was all talk. He didn’t want a girl in his room when he didn’t have his clothes on! Especially not—

“Everything okay?”

“Can’t you tell?” Richie asked, his voice shaking.

Why the fuck was he so nervous?

All of a sudden, a t-shirt was being pushed into his hand. Richie snatched it hastily and pulled it on, doing his best to angle himself in a way that Bev couldn’t see his scar. The arm hole was almost too small to fit his cast, but he was thankful Beverly didn’t try to help him. A moment later, he was panting and mostly dressed. He really needed to find another sock.

“Richie, can I just talk to you for a minute?”

No, Richie wanted to snap. No, because he had a *therapist* to talk to about his problems and no one else needed to know about them. No

one else needed to go asking him how he felt or what was on his mind—or what it felt like to wake up in that gross fridge. Or what it felt like to have his first and only kiss ever come from *Patrick Fucking Hockstetter*.

“Sorry, Bev—I’ve only got eyes for Mrs. K.”

“Richie, please...” She sounded both exhausted and desperate. She was worried about him and he knew it, but he didn’t know what to do with that information just yet. Just because she was worried didn’t mean she wouldn’t find him repulsive once she knew. What she really wanted was to hear him say what had happened... Whether out of morbid curiosity or misguided concern, he didn’t know.

Richie just didn’t know.

“What?” He said, looking around for the partner to the sock he’d grabbed earlier. He knew he’d grabbed two of them—where did it go?

“Everyone’s really sorry about what happened at the hospital—”

“At the hospital, gov’ner?” Richie said, trying to force on a British accent. It was a little out of practice, but he thought he did an okay job given the circumstances.

No luck finding his sock though and he’d already torn apart his bed, his towel and two blankets wrapped around his shoulders again.

“No one thinks you’re sick, Richie. I just... I just wanted you to know that. No one thinks you have AIDS. No one thinks any less of you. Eddie just doesn’t know how to watch his mouth—a lot like you. Makes sense you’re friends, right?”

Richie couldn’t think of anything to say—witty or otherwise. His mind was reeling from the memory of waking up hearing his best friend accuse him of having AIDS. His germaphobe friend who probably wouldn’t have visited him in the hospital if he had a choice. His germaphobe friend who wouldn’t be *here* if he had a choice wasting time with a—

“*Filthy little faggot.*”

Richie flinched as he felt hands close around his wrists. In the same, frightened moment, he realized he'd ripped out more of his hair and Beverly was frowning at him.

"Eddie really feels bad about how things went down... They don't... The guys don't understand what it's like to be in that situation. I'm not going to say I know how you feel—I never will. But I've been through some...some similar things. It hurts and it's embarrassing. I know about keeping secrets and trying to keep a straight face through it all. I love you guys, all of you—I really do—but I *know* about being afraid of what my friends would think of me if they knew the truth. That's why I haven't ever told anyone about...about my dad and me."

Her dad? Did she just say *her dad*? Richie found himself swallowing hard against the lump in his throat. Her own *dad*?

She was looking at him so sadly, so compassionately, and Richie felt for a moment that she really did understand. She *did* know how he felt. At least a little bit. At least where it mattered most.

"I have the choice of who I tell... No one knows. No one ever found out what happened in my home. With how they found you, you didn't get that option. I'm sorry, Richie. I'm really sorry, but I promise you, none of us thinks any less of you. Least of all me. We just want you to feel better. We want to help."

Richie felt nauseous, his head spinning as he sank down onto his bed. Not only was he now one-hundred percent sure his friends knew what had happened to him, despite his deepest wish to believe they thought he'd just been badly beaten, he knew Beverly's darkest secret too.

How must she have felt, playing Truth or Dare, given her reputation at school? Was she just as afraid of it as him? Afraid to be asked if she'd ever slept with anyone the way he was afraid to be asked if he even liked girls?

"It wasn't Henry," Richie found himself whispering, his eyes fixed on the floor as his fingertips dug at the fibers of his blankets. "It... It was Hockstetter. Patrick," he tacked on, as if he needed to clarify. "I... I just told them it was Bowers because...because it's what my parents

wanted me to say. Not like they told me to, but... Patrick was missing and Henry—”

“Henry was easier to convict. Yeah. I can see that. If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure It got Patrick. I hope it was fucking gruesome, too,” she added. Her hand was on Richie’s shoulder, squeezing it through his layers of blankets. “Don’t worry, though. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Yours too,” Richie said, meeting her gaze for a split second before dropping his gaze to the blankets. He wanted to think of something funny to say, something witty at least, but nothing came to mind. He didn’t feel like himself. He felt flayed and raw, and immediately twice as anxious when Bev stood to let his other friends in the room.

His heart seized in his chest as they filed in. They were looking at his belongings, Ben sifting through his collection of comics and Bill picking up a paperback he’d been given and never even tried to read. Mike was admiring a poster, saying he’d seen one just like it in this “cool record store.” Stanley was sitting nervously on the foot of Richie’s bed. Bev was smiling at him from the doorway with far more affection than he deserved.

“Here, Trashmouth. Those pictures Mom promised.” Eddie flopped onto Richie’s bed right next to him and was holding up a folded napkin that had crude stick figures drawn on it. Clearly a masterpiece forged in the hallway while they’d been waiting for Richie to get his shit together and let them in.

Richie laughed at them, flipping through the three crinkled napkins before hurrying off his bed to make a show of pinning the artworks to his cork board above his dresser. He tore a piece of scrap paper off an old take-home sheet he’d never finished and would never turn in now and drew a stick figure with three legs which he flourished in front of Eddie’s face.

“Here’s one of me, for dear old Mrs. K,” Richie said.

“You forgot your own glasses, dipshit,” Eddie said, grabbing the little scrap of paper—his fingers squeezing against Richie’s for a moment longer than necessary—and ripping it up before making it rain

confetti all over Richie's pillow.

They flung the bits of paper at each other for a moment or two before Richie's attention was called away to Ben, asking about one of his volumes. Richie was ever aware of Eddie's closeness to him on the bed—but it still startled him when he felt the other boy's hand in between his shoulder blades. He didn't tense though. He knew it was Eddie. He felt safe with Eddie—with his friends.

They were smiling at him. They were laughing *with* him. No one treated him like he was unclean. No one treated him like he was fragile.

Damn. Molly Ringwald was right. That afternoon, it really felt like his friends didn't think any less of him at all.

( ) ( ) ( )

School was better without Bowers and his gang there—or so Bill had told him.

Maybe it was true for the Losers who no one else knew or cared about, but it was Hell for Richie. It was so much worse than it had ever been. Teachers were too nice to him, students avoided him—whispered about him. He was excused from gym class and the rumors as to why ran rampant. This week, the favorite was he'd split open from the ass and bleed to death if he ran.

Maybe two months ago that was true, but now he was really just out of gym class because he still needed physical therapy to work on his coordination and dexterity. And because he'd asked not to be made to go. He didn't want to change and shower in front of all those other boys. He wanted left alone. He wanted to wear as many layers as he could and hide under pillows of fabric.

"Don't listen to those assholes, Richie," Stan said, clapping Richie on the back as they walked home together. Well, to Eddie's home. They were going to watch some sci-fi special Bill was really excited about that his mother deemed too violent to watch at his place. Richie knew if they tried to have it at his place, his mother would hover the whole time which made his friends uncomfortable. She was trying to

be nice—always trying to bring more snacks and drinks and check to make sure Richie wasn't getting burnt out or overwhelmed—but he could see the glances his friends passed each other when she appeared too often and deemed his house off limits. They couldn't go to Beverly's aunt's, and Stan's parents weren't about to condone a violent alien film. Eddie's house while his mother was at her Wednesday water aerobics course was the best option.

"Th-They j-just d-don't h-have an-anything better t-to do w-with their b-b-brains," Bill said, sounding significantly more angry than usual. "T-Too b-bad It d-didn't g-g-get so-some of them. G-G-Guess we'll have to settle w-with H-Hockstetter b-being the only o-one It took."

At the mention of his name, Richie immediately stumbled—his knees giving out and sending him sprawling onto the sidewalk, scratching his palms on the poorly shoveled pavement and chunks of rock salt.

All at once, his friends were grabbing him and trying to help him up. His mind was caught between the present—the helpful and supportive grip of his friends—and Patrick.

*"I want to show you my favorite hiding place."*

He felt a tongue pushing into his mouth—he felt bony hips between his thighs.

Stan was rubbing his back.

Bill was stuttering out, "Breathe, just breathe."

Eddie was kneeling in front of him, looking blurry and distorted as Richie realized his eyes had started to tear. He was hyperventilating again and he didn't have his medication on him to calm himself down.

A knife was slicing down his chest, tearing open his shirt and exposing him to the chilly air—exposing him to Patrick's feral gaze.

"Richie, breathe—breathe!" Eddie's hands were on either side of Richie's flushed face, cooling his warm cheeks. "I've got rubbing alcohol at home and antibiotic ointment. You won't get sick! I won't let you get sick!"

Get sick?

Didn't they know he was already sick?

“Guys, give him room. You’re crowding him!” Beverly called. Richie, solely focused on Eddie’s creased and worried face in front of him, felt a space open up around him. Suddenly, people weren’t pulling on him anymore. That phantom weight of someone pushing down on his chest and pinning his wrists when no one was near them at all disappeared. “You okay, Richie?” She asked, so warm and compassionate. It made Richie yearn for his mother. He wanted to go back home to his mother.

“No, he’s not okay!” Eddie shouted. “He’s bleeding! There’s a cigarette butt *right there!* He could’ve caught hepatitis!”

“No one’s catching anything!” Bill said, not stuttering once.

Richie blinked, feeling hot tears turn ice cold on his cheeks where they ran against Eddie’s fingers.

Eddie...

Eddie couldn’t touch him!

His face was wet—Patrick had *pissed on him!*

Richie jerked away, wiping his face with his stinging hands.

“Come on, we gotta get back to my place,” Eddie said, trying to pull Richie up by his shoulders. “I’ll patch you up in no time.”

“Eddie, don’t!” Beverly warned.

“Here, Richie—take my scarf. You need to wrap up your hands.” Ben was pushing something soft and cottony into his hands.

He felt like a doll—like a toy—unable to think and move on his own. His friends were twisting him this way and that, wrapping up his hands and dusting rock salt and snow off his knees where he’d fallen. He was being led down the sidewalk, shivering the whole way back to Eddie’s house. He wasn’t able to speak. All he could smell was

smoke and piss. Could Eddie smell it too?

He had to. Eddie knew how gross he was. How was he not gagging already? Why wasn't he pushing Richie back down into the street with his filthy hepatitis or AIDS or whatever else they thought he had?

Back at Eddie's house, his hands were forced under a flow of water in the bathroom sink—Eddie scrubbing at them with soap which burned, his own fingers protected by Latex gloves. After they were scrubbed, Eddie set to applying antiseptic and then antibacterial cream, then gauze pads and then layers upon layers of bandages as if he'd burned his palms in fire instead of taking a tumble onto the sidewalk.

By the time Richie came back to his body, he wasn't crying anymore or hyperventilating. He just felt dizzy and exhausted and wanted more than anything to sleep.

He needed to leave. He was such a mess. His friends didn't need him here ruining their night. They were supposed to be having fun, and now they'd missed the first twenty minutes of the sci-fi movie they'd gathered to watch in the first place.

It was his fault. It was all his fault.

They were going to hate him and he'd have no friends left. Eddie was going to get sick from being friends with him—

“Popcorn, Richie?” Eddie said, suddenly thrusting a large bowl of it into Richie's lap.

He blinked down at it, then looked at his bandaged hands. Was this a trick?

“I... I can't,” he said. What if the bandages slipped and he got blood in it? What if he made Eddie sick? What if he did have AIDS and no one wanted to admit it?

“Well, I'm not going to feed it to you, Trashmouth,” Eddie said.

“What if I bleed in it?” Richie asked, embarrassed when everyone

turned to stare at him. Even Mike's eyebrows seemed to shoot up high on his head.

"What, th-through s-seven l-layers of b-bandages? F-Fat ch-hance," Bill said.

"I'll help," Stan said, suddenly grabbing a fist full of popcorn. "Richie, catch!"

"Guys—no! If we get popcorn everywhere, Mom'll kill me!"

It was too late though. Stan was throwing pieces of popcorn into the air that either bounced off Richie's face or ended up in his hands or near enough to his mouth that he caught them.

"That's your fault," Stan said. "You wrapped his hands up like a mummy. He can't eat like that."

"Yeah, Eddie, you missed Halloween by a month," Ben said, shuffling over to get a handful of popcorn for himself.

Eddie snatched back the bowl of popcorn and turned up the volume on the television. Richie tried to focus on the movie, working up the confidence to take pieces of popcorn one at a time from the bowl.

And then, as he was reaching into the bowl, eyes fixed on the screen, his fingers struck Eddie's and he froze.

Bad feelings flooded him so suddenly he almost started to cry. God, he'd spent too much time the past few months crying like a pathetic baby, he really didn't want to do it twice in the same day in front of his friends. But his hand was touching Eddie's. They were sharing food and his gross, bloody, filthy hand was touching Eddie's. *He was going to make him sick.*

He was going to make Eddie figure out that he—  
was a *filthy little faggot.*

He was going to give Eddie AIDS. He was—  
"*my little toy.*"

Patrick's voice rang in his ears and Richie tried to pull his hand out of the bowl of popcorn only to realize his pinky finger was twisted around Eddie's.

Had he done that? Had he accidentally snagged the other boy's finger the way he tangled his digits in his hair to rip it out when Eddie tried to pull away? What was Eddie going to *think*? That Richie was *trying* to poison him?

Richie shot a quick look toward his friend, desperately trying to read his expression and prepared for fear or disgust or anger. What he got instead was a crease of worry and those big, brown eyes peering at him nervously. Richie's whole body stiffened. Why wasn't Eddie yanking his hand away? Why wasn't Eddie calling him filthy gross?

Eddie clenched his hand, squeezing Richie's pinky with his own, and then let go and looked back at the television like nothing had happened.

Richie didn't eat any more popcorn, but he didn't fret about accidentally hitting Eddie's hand again. His heart was pounding in his chest, Beverly kept passing odd little smiles at him that he didn't understand... Richie missed most of the movie because he was still thinking about what it felt like to sort of, kind of hold hands with Eddie.

By the time he and all the others were sneaking out the back door while Eddie's mom's car pulled in the front drive, Richie couldn't even remember what he'd been worried about.

## 4. Intermission

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is short and I am sorry. I just wanted to show some Loser's Club perspective and then my brain went blank. It's so short I won't even count it toward my six chapter goal and will consider it an intermission before our regularly scheduled programming. I've held onto this little blurb for a while now and am hoping to get more inspiration soon during my Writer's Retreat.

Thank you for being patient!

The Losers Club realized something was wrong as soon as they reached the spot where they'd ditched their bikes before heading into the woods. It was maybe half an hour after Richie ran away from their club house, upset for some reason after being asked if it was true that he was so desperate to get laid he'd even go out with another guy. His bike was still laying on the ground beside the others and they hadn't seen any trace of him on their way out.

"W-We ha-have to go and look for hi-him," Bill said, trying to sound brave when it was so clear by the look on his face in the moonlight that he was terrified. He was just as scared as the rest of them. "I-If It g-got him, we ha-have to fight."

They all nodded, even Stan who was visibly shaking.

For three hours, they searched through the woods in the dark and all they came across was Henry Bowers and two of his goons stomping out of the forest muttering "crazy ass bastard" and variations thereof. They searched the woods, they searched the barrens as far as they'd dare in the pitch blackness.

No Richie...

Whatever trouble they each would've gotten in when they came home so late was erased when they told their parents the awful news

—relying on Stan’s mother to call Richie’s parents.

None of them slept that night, and participating in the human chain meant to scour the woods—Richie’s last known location—felt like torture. They were afraid to be hopeful. They were afraid to think he might have just tripped or lost his glasses and taken a wrong turn. Deep down, they knew it was the clown. It got him.

As soon as the search party was called off, they had plans to go to Neibolt and into It’s lair. They had to get Richie back.

Bill was running through game plan after game plan as he tromped through the woods—the only one not calling Richie’s name as he moved. He was so focused, so centered on his anger and hate towards It, it took his father shaking him by both his shoulders to realize the party was rushing off to the left in a stampede.

“They found him, Bill!”

Bill stared into his father’s stern face, heard the words as though they were spoken in a foreign language, and then bolted with the rest of the search party.

Would he be alive? What would It have done to him? What if he was comatose? What condition would he be in?

Learning that it wasn’t *It* that caught Richie was probably more jarring, more heartrending than the alternative. Bill and Eddie were able to shoulder through the adults to make it over to where Officer Bowers was kneeling beside a large, mossy tree. The old man was basically *petting* Richie like a dog. That meant he was still alive, but Bill didn’t feel any better.

“What the hell happened to him?” Eddie asked, his voice low and shaking with horror.

“B-Bowers,” Bill said, his stomach flipping. They had passed Bowers in the woods and hadn’t paid his presence nearly enough attention. They’d searched the Barrens when they should’ve kept searching the forest. Who knew how long Richie had been laying there hurt...

The guilt only grew worse when Richie was hoisted up onto the

gurney and the coat covering him fell away. Bowers had apparently stripped him naked and beaten him within an inch of his life. There was hardly an inch of his flesh that wasn't covered in blood.

Everything after that felt like a blur. They waited for hours and hours at the hospital only to be told that they couldn't see him. Weeks went by with no word except what the adults whispered about when they stood in line at the grocery store.

“No suspects. Can you believe it?”

“You don't think... All of the other children?”

“I heard he was molested. Poor boy...”

“Well, he had that long hair.”

“It was probably that priest.”

“Some sexual deviant... Sick man. Poor kid definitely contracted HIV. No doubt about it.”

“What was he thinking taking a short cut through the woods in the middle of the night?”

“His parents must be so upset. I couldn't imagine...”

“Didn't his parents teach him *anything*? ”

“Those poor people...”

“I heard he's comatose. You know he's never going to wake up.”

“I can't believe his parents are spending all that money to keep him like that. He's just a vegetable at this point. They need to pull the plug.”

“Let him go.”

“It has to be such a burden.”

“Definitely has AIDS. Poor kid.”

It made Bill absolutely sick. So many people wanted to weigh in on what had happened—wanted to blame Richie, wanted to blame his parents. They wanted to say they would be better, their kids were smarter. He hated hearing his friend being talked about as if he were some kind of simple fool who got what he had coming to him.

The only peace Bill and the other Losers had at that time was Patrick Hockstetter went missing on the same night. It was theorized the pervert in the woods had captured and tortured them both and Richie had managed to escape.

Bill was convinced that It got Patrick.

He didn't have long to dwell on it because a little over two weeks after *someone* got Richie, It got Beverly.

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Eddie hated that it had come to this. The first time he got to see Richie after two months of him being in the hospital and unresponsive, it was like his friend didn't even want him there. They came in because Richie's parents had reached out to them, said Richie needed company. Then, as soon as Richie saw them, he started shaking and crying and *screamed* as if he were afraid of them all.

Was he still that mad about Truth or Dare? Did he think it was their fault he got hurt? In a way, it was—wasn't it? Because they didn't try to stop him from leaving. They didn't look hard enough for him...

Eddie couldn't even begin to understand why Richie would react to *them* that way. He couldn't place his finger on why it made him feel...betrayed.

He was stuck frozen in the doorway, watching Richie sob and cover his face until *Beverly* went over and hugged him. Eddie wanted to yell at her, to tell her it was obvious that Richie didn't like it, but then he was hugging her back and crying into her chest while she whispered to him.

It made him uncomfortable, more uncomfortable than being in the germ-den of a hospital. Maybe, deep down, he was a little bit jealous

to see her so close to Richie. She knew him the least and yet there she was, petting his hair which had grown long and dull. A moment later, Bill was sitting beside Richie on the bed and hugging him too. Then Stan.

Eddie felt a spark of panic rise in his chest and he hurried over to hug Richie as well, show that he still cared for his friend even if he was sick—even if he was wrapped up in a blanket that had seen countless numbers of sick bodies. As Eddie hugged him, his face ended up buried in the faded, dark-brown curls. He smelled of sterile hospital grade soap and hand sanitizer, nothing like the usual musk of sweat and salt of too many snacks. His smell had changed, his demeanor had changed... Eddie was afraid their friendship had changed. He didn't want things to change—least of all for the worst.

Richie continued to cry into Beverly's chest until settling back against his pillows, sniffling and wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Sorry, guys. It's been so long since I've seen a nice rack," Richie said, adjusting his cracked glasses. "Gets me all worked up."

"Beep-Beep, Richie," Beverly said, smiling while ruffling Richie's hair.

They didn't get to stay for long, but the whole time Eddie sat next to him, rubbing Richie's back until the other boy fell asleep against Stan's shoulder. Stan laughed nervously as soon as he noticed and patted Richie on the head like a beloved dog.

They tucked him back into his pillows and blankets and let him be.

They left, and the next time they visited, Eddie was the one Richie fell asleep on. That felt natural. That felt like the way it should be. They'd fallen asleep together a couple of times just like it in the hammock at the club house and their respective couches when having sleepovers that ran too late into the night. It had been normal—it had been nice. And then Richie had woken up at the most inopportune time, coming to the conclusion that Eddie thought he had AIDS.

There was so much pain in his voice when he yelled at them to get

out—so much shame in his tearful eyes. It was so unlike him to show such pain without a mask of humor to hide behind. No impressions, no jokes—just raw agony on display. Somehow, that made it all so much worse.

The whole walk home, Eddie was berated by his friends for what he'd let slip. He didn't need their insults. Really, he felt bad enough.

It became his mission, his purpose, to do anything in his power to make sure Richie never felt that way again. He stood up for him as best he could while in school and went out of his way—to the point of looking half-crazed and desperate—to make physical contact whenever he could, just to send the message to Richie and everyone that he didn't think Richie was sick.

At least not with anything contractible.

It was becoming all too obvious that Richie was sick. He would freeze up randomly, stare off into space and start sweating, start panting... He'd be sitting in class perfectly fine one moment and the next be silently crying with his head buried in his hands while the other students snickered at him. Richie would be sitting with all of them, joking around the lunch table like nothing had ever changed, and would then get angry and defensive about the smallest of things. Eddie started to feel like Richie had been possessed by something—maybe *It* did get him.

Eddie just couldn't understand. They'd all been through a lot over the summer—Richie more than any of them, really—but no one else had changed so drastically. Stan was more skittish and would seize up now and then, Bill would lash out more quickly than before if something set him off, but no one flipped between emotions as rapidly as Richie.

This week, nearly six months after his attack, they had decided to go to the arcade. Eddie didn't really like the place, put off by the mysteriously sticky and greasy buttons and all the germs saturating every surface, but Richie did. His face lit up so bright as soon as Bill suggested it. They'd all pooled their allowance money together so Richie could play as long as he wanted.

Pinball, Pac-Man, Street Fighter—over and over. Richie was smiling, everyone was happy. Eddie sucked at most of the games because he didn't like touching the greasy buttons, but he liked seeing Richie so cheerful.

And then, when he should be celebrating—the game crying out “New High Score!” in its deep, booming voice—Richie’s smile suddenly dropped as if he’d just been slapped.

“Richie?”

“I want to go home,” he answered, sounding painfully close to tears.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Eddie pressed.

“I-I don’t know—I’m... I’m bored—I want to leave. I want to go home!” He was backing away from Bill and Stan who tried to comfort him, bumping into some other kid who was walking past behind him. He recoiled as if the kid had burnt him and then bolted, leaving behind his pile of tokens for Bill to hastily pick up for him.

Eddie chased after Richie, not sure it was the best idea considering how Beverly always cautioned them against crowding him. He called to him over and over until his lungs ached for his inhaler and he had to stop running to take a hit. When he stopped running, so did Richie—collapsing onto the sidewalk as if his knees just gave out on him. He was sobbing and wouldn’t say why, even as the other Losers caught up to him. All he said was that he wanted to go home.

No jokes. No crude comments. He just cried...

He wasn’t really *Richie* anymore, and Eddie wondered if he ever would be. Was that selfish of him? It wasn’t that he wanted Richie to just get over it... He just wished his friend was better. He wished Richie would stop panicking and running from them as if he thought his friends would make him the subject of ridicule.

“P-Pl-Please, *please* just t-tell us wh-what happened,” Bill pressed, kneeling on the sidewalk in front of Richie—putting a hand on his shoulder while Richie tried to writhe away from him as if the contact stung. “W-We wo-won’t do it e-ever again. Whatever i-it was that we

d-did. T-Tell us and we wo-won't let it happened a-again."

Richie squirmed and pushed Bill's hand away, recoiled from him and covered his face as if he were being attacked instead of comforted. Eddie and the others, they just stood there helplessly watching.

"R-Richie, p-please. We're y-your friends. You c-can t-t-trust us. Please."

It took a few more minutes and an adult walking by asking if they needed help for Richie to get to his feet and agree to go back to Bill's house. Ben and Mike said they were going back to their own homes, leaving Eddie, Bill, and Stan to walk with Richie who was shivering.

However fortunately or unfortunately, Bill's mother was in the living room as they came in and did not take Richie's obvious distress lightly. She fussed over him which he clearly didn't like, repeatedly telling her "I'm fine, Mrs. D. No thank you, Mrs. D. I really don't want anything, Mrs. D" until she took the hint and left them alone.

They watched television for a little while before Bill dared to ask the question again. What did they do that upset him?

Eddie was sitting as close to Richie as possible, wanting to put a hand on his shoulder but realizing Richie probably didn't want it.

"When... When it happened, when it was happening... I-I don't know. I thought of anything else. Anywhere else. Sometimes I see things or hear things and...it takes me back to *that* place. Out of nowhere. It can be anything... A noise or a smell or just *something*. I'm really sorry. I had a lot of fun. Sorry I ruined it. You guys don't... You don't have to go places with me to try and make me feel better. You don't have to hang out with me. I'm just a fil—" His face paled and tears started falling. When Eddie tried to touch him, Richie jerked away. "Freak. I'm a freak."

"Yeah, y-you are," Bill said. "We a-all are. We're n-not spending t-time with you out of p-pity. You're o-our friend. We l-love you, Ri-Rich—Richie."

"That's g-gay," Richie stammered, still white-faced, still shivering.

There were several more instances just like that one where Richie shut down and they were left scrambling to piece him back together, trying to make him see that they weren't burdened by his presence.

Healing was a process—Richie's mother told them all that enough times whenever Richie would step away to use the restroom, or storm off to his bedroom and leave them awkwardly in his living room. Healing was a process and they were all so *wonderful* for being patient with him. He was so *lucky* to have friends like them.

Eddie felt bad for Richie. If he heard her saying things like that, it was no wonder he felt like he was burdening his friends by just existing. Yeah, he wasn't always easy, but none of them *cared*. He was still Richie—he was still their friend.

So, when Bill's birthday came around again, he was still invited to the sleepover. This time, Richie's parents actually let him go. Eddie came by so they could walk over together and, for one reason or another, thought it'd be a good idea to carry Richie's sleeping bag for him.

Cue the nonstop, forced jokes about beds—Eddie trying to get into Richie's bed. Got him in the bag. That's one way to "hit the sack."

"Beep-Beep, Richie. Beep-Beep, Richie. Beep-Beep, Richie!" Eddie was practically screaming while Richie was laughing hysterically at his own bad jokes.

"Oh, yes! Talk dirty to me," Richie was cackling as Bill opened the door for them.

Richie continued his innuendos all through their meal of pizza and soda, shut his mouth for the duration of a movie, then went back to it once it was over. He was smiling so much, laughing so genuinely. Eddie found himself watching Richie, admiring his shining teeth—the pink tint to his cheeks, the sparkle in his eyes. He looked like himself again. Eddie scooted closer to him on the couch until their legs were touching. He wanted Richie to know he wasn't afraid to touch him. He didn't think he had germs or AIDS. He just—

Whatever thought Eddie had in his head fizzled out because Richie's

hand clapped down on his knee. His body went rigid and he stared down at Richie's hand in shock, wondering if he grabbed him by mistake—wondering if this was the punchline to a joke he missed. Wondering why Richie wasn't even looking at him, just staring at the television where a police chase was playing out with comedic commentary. Eddie just stared at Richie's hand until Richie pulled it away casually—no joke, no acknowledgment.

It started to near two in the morning when Bill laid out his sleeping bag on the floor, giving the couch to Stan who complained of a bad back like the old man he was inside. Eddie laid his bag next to Richie's, sighing in annoyance as Richie squirmed around an excessively long amount of time, kicking his sleeping bag-clad feet into the backs of Eddie's knees and laughing when Eddie finally told him to knock it off.

Ben was snoring before long, Bill's nose doing its annoying whistle once he passed out. Stan was silent, thankfully, and Eddie was left laying wide awake because he could feel the warmth of Richie's sleeping bag too close to his own on the floor. He covered his head with half of his pillow, staring at the wall while Ben snored, Bill's nose whistled, Stan rolled over on the couch...

His mind was flickering back to the way they'd found Richie in the woods, all covered in blood. Then he started thinking about the clown...

Ugh, he was never going to be able to sleep. Eddie rolled over onto his stomach, burying his face in the pillow. Beside him, Richie let out a soft, sleepy sigh and started grinding his teeth. Eddie filed away the mental note to remind Richie to get a mouth guard so he didn't chip a tooth one of these nights. Didn't he realize grinding his teeth could give him lockjaw? TMJ? He bet if he said any of those things, Richie would just turn it into a dirty joke.

Ben choked on a snore and rolled over—disturbing Bill who moaned in his sleep and shifted around inside his sleeping bag.

Eddie wanted to hit his head into the floor until he passed out. He really hated sleepovers. He never got any sleep if he wasn't in his own bed...

Richie's teeth squeaked together a few more times, then he let out a strangled, sharp whimper that effectively got Eddie to sit up. Was it a nightmare? Should Eddie wake him up?

Richie's brow scrunched up and he let out another cry.

"Richie?" Eddie reached to touch Richie's shoulder, then pulled back. Richie didn't like to be touched when he got upset. "Richie, it's okay," Eddie whispered, hesitating to shake him awake. What if Richie woke up thinking Eddie was attacking him?

After letting out another shrill whimper, Richie started panting—sobbing.

He was crying in his sleep and Eddie was petrified, afraid he'd make it worse if he touched him. Every time he touched Richie when he was upset, Beverly either snapped at him or Richie shoved him away.

"What's the matter?" Stan said groggily, sitting up. "Richie?"

"He's having a nightmare," Eddie said, looking at his friend helplessly.

"So wake him up," Stan said, rubbing his face before doing what Eddie couldn't—reaching down to shake Richie by his shoulder.

The second he touched him, Richie sat up screaming—striking at Stan's hand.

"Don't touch me! Get off me! I didn't do anything to you!" Richie sobbed, waking up Bill and Ben. "Don't *touch* me," Richie cried, flinching away from anyone who tried to get near him.

"R-Richie, it's okay," Bill said, kneeling a couple feet back from Richie. "It's j-just u-us. We w-would never hurt you. I-It's j-j-just a bad d-dream."

Richie stared at him a moment, then seemed to come back into his body. A look of panic and horror covered his face as he seemed to realize what had happened.

After that, he didn't stay with them for a sleepover again... Not once.